

## The Winter Out There

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## The Winter Out There

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### Summary

"At night, Harry dreams of bags of hair. Muggle plastic freezer bags, ziplocked, neatly labeled. Harry can't see what the labels say, but the sight of the bags makes him nauseous. He opens his mouth to scream and realizes that he cannot. Then, he wakes."

### Notes

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At night, Harry dreams of bags of hair. Muggle plastic freezer bags, ziplocked, neatly labeled. Harry can't see what the labels say, but the sight of the bags makes him nauseous. He opens his mouth to scream and realizes that he cannot. Then, he wakes.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's morning, and there's the familiar feel of restraints around his wrists, soothing and comforting. The nightmare begins to fade.

Harry struggles in his bonds lazily, sleepily, a half-hearted test of the boundaries of his confinement. The metal chains connecting the restraints to the headboard of the bed make a soft clanging noise.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

Next to him, Severus stirs and places a palm on Harry's thigh.

“Sleep,” Severus says.

Harry breathes in and out, trying to do just that. It turns out to be an impossible task: Severus' fingers are a wicked distraction, sliding in the cleft of Harry's arse, stroking his anus, still stretched out by yesterday's vigorous fucking.

“It's kind of hard to obey when you're molesting me,” Harry complains. “You're just setting me up for failure so you can punish me.”

“I wasn't aware that I needed an excuse,” Severus says in a dry, humorless tone that makes Harry snicker. His snicker turns into a yelp when Severus gives his arse a sharp slap.

“Since you're not sleeping, I might as well make use of your hole. On your belly, legs apart,” Severus orders. Harry obeys quickly, enjoying the way Severus' fingers grip his hips and lift them up, then grab hold of his buttocks and part them.

Severus fucks quickly, furiously; Harry moves his hips, tries to relax himself to accommodate him. It burns and even hurts some, but it's the good kind of burning that sends mindbogglingly sweet waves all the way down to his groin. He's hard, painfully so, but he won't come, not from this alone.

“More,” Harry whispers. “More!” He's desperate to come, he's willing to beg, he's willing to call Severus 'Master', except Severus doesn't like any of that. He doesn't need the begging, he doesn't need the honorifics. He needs something else.

Harry feels Severus' cock drive into him one last time. Then, Severus' fingers reach under his belly, seek out his cock and give it one firm squeeze. Harry lets out a long groan even as his release fills the hollow of Severus' palm.

Severus pulls away, climbs off, stretches out to lie on his side.

Harry shifts closer to him, as much as the chains permit. He buries his face in Severus' bony shoulder.

Severus reaches out for Harry, absentmindedly strokes his back. Harry sighs. It's a lonely kind of embrace, as if Severus is far away and not really *with* him. He clings to Severus even more, wanting to fuse with him, grow into him. Sometimes, it feels like Harry almost succeeds, sometimes it feels like he's something that has grown *out* of Severus. Harry doesn't mind that feeling, because Severus needs him, and that's the only thing that matters.

Severus stretches his hand to the bedside table and takes his wand. Swish and flick, he removes Harry's restraints. Harry knows they need to get up, but he doesn't want to, so they just lie in bed and Harry stares at Severus. They're both naked now. Severus is bony and awkward, all pale skin, the Dark Mark looking stark black on his left forearm. Severus notices Harry looking at it and stiffens slightly while Harry thinks, strange, five years since the war, but the bloody thing hasn't faded a single bit. Then again, maybe some things never do. Severus is one of those things, unfaded and unchanged.

Harry's life now is also something without any change. Every day is much like the one before. And sometime ago, all the days began to blur into one big whole. There are no more weekdays and weekends, no more Christmases and Easters, no more schooldays and holidays. Somewhere out there, there's a world with all that; the world where Voldemort was defeated five years ago, the

world where people go about their regular lives. Yet, in here, there's only them: Severus, Harry, Severus' collar around Harry's neck, Severus' hand on Harry's head. Harry isn't fully sure whether this is enough for him, but it thrills him that someone would *need* him this way – not for his past, not for his name, not as a fragment of that *other* world. Snape needs Harry just for *him*, naked as he is.

Harry remembers how it all started and when: five years ago, on the night the war finally ended once and for all.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Five years ago...*

Hogwarts was filled with laughter and the music of celebration. The Great Hall was adorned with floating candles. A band that hastily arrived from Glasgow was playing something bright and upbeat. McGonagall was laughing cheerfully, eyes flashing with excitement, and the twins were attempting to dance with her, both at the same time. She didn't protest all that much.

Lupin and Tonks came too; they kept to themselves but looked just as happy as everyone else. Ron and Hermione were dancing together, fully absorbed in each other. Once in a rare while they'd turn in Harry's direction and smile at him, but neither waved for him to join them. Harry found himself watching them with just the smallest twinge of sadness, knowing that the three of them would never *need* each other the same way they used to.

Colin Creevey was dashing back and forth, snapping pictures madly and irritating the bloody hell out of everyone.

After that, there was just the whirlwind of everything: music and champagne, Harry and Snape shouting obscenities at each other, more champagne, a long walk to Snape's rooms together, and then – the opening of the door, the flickering of the flames in the hearth, Snape's arms around Harry, and Harry's, around Snape.

And then, it seemed there was nothing more to life than that: just Snape and Harry; Snape, sounding quite mad with desire, whispering things in Harry's ear, something about wanting him, needing him, just him, all to himself.

The following morning, Harry woke up early. The euphoria of victory had already faded; he didn't quite know what he wanted to do next. He felt empty and done. One thing, though, Harry was certain of: this chapter of his life (the war, Voldemort and all) was now closed, he'd given all that he had, and he had nothing left to give to anyone but himself.

Himself. Then again, hadn't Snape asked for exactly that?

"I agree," Harry whispered in his ear.

Snape woke up, instantly alert, at those words. Harry felt Snape's fingers closing around his wrist in an iron grip.

"Do you even know what you're agreeing to?" Snape hissed, forcing Harry to lie on his back, climbing on top of him. Harry strained against Snape's hold, looking up at him. Snape's face was twisted with desperate need, passion, intensity. "You agree to be mine? Agree to be owned, agree to be kept? Agree to be with someone who needs you so much he'll never let you go?"

"Fuck, yes," Harry whispered back, his mind reeling from the feeling that he was teetering on the edge of a cliff, about to jump. Then again, wasn't that what he'd been doing all his life, year after

year, until, finally he reached this one cliff that was likely his last?

\* \* \* \* \*

So, five years ago, Harry jumped. Sometimes, he feels like Severus has caught him, breaking his fall at the very last moment.

Other times, Harry feels like he is still falling.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry feels Severus' hand on his shoulder, nudging him to get out of bed.

“Come now,” Severus says. “Get dressed. Fix breakfast.”

Short orders, clear instructions, the rituals of obedience. Harry is used to those, they define him, they, and the walls of Severus' home. Severus and Harry don't go out much, in fact, not more than a few times a year. Severus doesn't like sharing Harry with the world.

“Get dressed,” Harry repeats, as he crawls out of bed. “Has it been two weeks?”

Harry spends his days naked; Severus likes him naked and wants to have full access to him all the time. The only times that Harry gets dressed is when his friends come to visit.

“Your friends are coming over,” Severus confirms. His voice is calm, but Harry notices that a small shadow crosses Severus' face. Severus doesn't like it when Harry's friends come over.

He really likes it when it's just him and Harry. Harry imagines that his friends notice that. The twins, Luna, Ginny, Tonks and Remus – almost never visit anymore. Ron and Hermione are the only ones who still visit, every two weeks, like clockwork.

The days may blur together, but Harry can measure time in Ron and Hermione's visits.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ron and Hermione arrive a few hours later. There's a small moment of awkwardness when Harry looks at his friends and can't get enough of the sight. Hermione's cheeks are reddened with cold, Ron's blindingly red hair has snowflakes tangled in it. That's right, somewhere *out there*, it's winter, Harry thinks. It must be almost Christmastime.

Silently, Harry continues to stare at them, not knowing what to say. Then, slowly, uncertainly, he comes up to them and locks them in a tight embrace, both of them at once. Hermione's hair tickles his nose, Ron's sweater scratches Harry's neck, and Harry continues to hold onto them. He doesn't want to let them go; it feels like he hasn't seen them for a lifetime, or, perhaps, longer.

“I've missed you,” Harry whispers into Hermione's hair. Then, into Ron's sweater, “What took you so long?”

“It hasn't been that long,” Hermione says, lifting her hand to pat Harry's back. “It's only been two weeks! Harry! Let go, you're squashing me.”

He lets her go and together, they walk into the sitting room. Severus gives Ron and Hermione a quick nod, then departs, leaving the three of them alone. And then, there's that awkwardness again, as if they don't know what to talk about.

Eventually, Hermione is the first to breach the silence. She begins to talk about her work with the

Ministry, she works in the Department of – something for advancing the welfare of magical creatures, Harry is embarrassed to ask because he'd forgotten. Ron is still with the Auror Office, the team leader for his unit, and proud of it. Ron waves his wand triumphantly, as if eager to demonstrate his new skills. For one horrifying moment Harry dreads that Ron might want to spar with him, duel, play-fight. Harry feels tense at the thought; he hadn't held his wand in five years now. He doubts he remembers what it feels like in his hand.

Fortunately, Ron doesn't offer anything of the sort.

Ron and Hermione continue to talk. Harry barely listens; he can't keep up with all that stuff from the outside. He simply watches them, staring intently into their faces, and can't escape the feeling that he doesn't know them anymore. Not at all. He doesn't recognize Hermione's smile, or the excited sparkles in Ron's eyes. He doesn't recognize Hermione's laughter when Ron tickles her neck. He looks away, not wanting to watch. All he wants is to run to Severus, bury his face in Severus' robe, and stay with him – just him.

“So what do you do these days, Harry?” Ron asks in a very cheerful way.

“Uh. Just... you know,” Harry makes an indeterminate gesture with his hand. “Stuff.”

Hermione giggles in a stranger's voice. Harry flinches.

“So,” Harry asks quickly, before it all gets any more awkward between them, “what are you two doing for Christmas?”

“Uh... well, my parents have this cabin in Scotland. They aren't using it. We thought we'd just go there,” Hermione answers, blushing slightly.

“Can I come too?” Harry blurts out, shocking the hell out of himself by the fact that he just invited himself over to his friends' romantic getaway. “Just for a few days. We'll drink mulled wine, or eggnog, and tell ghost stories, and... I don't know, build a snow fortress or something. Huh?” Harry swallows hard. He can't believe how pathetic he sounds. More to the point, he isn't sure that it's even possible – to build a snow fortress with nearly perfect strangers.

Hermione looks surprised, but regroups quickly.

“Of course you should come, Harry! It'll be fun. You should bring Snape, too.”

“Uh-huh,” Ron agrees, smiling. “I think that'd be neat. It's been a while...”

And there it is again, the awkwardness. Harry bows his head. He already knows he's not going anywhere, and neither is Severus.

Severus re-enters the sitting room and begins to pace, looking sullen. He usually gives Harry and his friends some privacy, allowing them to catch up, but Severus' hospitality and tact never last long. An hour later, he's eager to get Harry's friends out of the house, and makes it obvious without words.

Nobody ever stays longer than two hours, ever.

With Severus back in the sitting room, Ron and Hermione get up hastily, give Harry bright smiles and head towards the doors. Harry follows them, half-relieved that they're leaving, half-sorry to see them go.

“Come back soon,” he says. “Come back next week.”

“We'll try,” Hermione promises. “If not next week, then the week after.”

And then, they're gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Severus looks furious, angry, and hurt all at once.

Harry undresses and puts his clothes away. He won't be needing them again soon. He comes up to Severus, stands on tiptoes, straining to look into Severus' eyes. Severus doesn't return his gaze.

Severus is always not quite himself after Ron and Hermione visit, he doesn't want to play or have sex or even talk to Harry for the rest of the day. Harry supposes that those visits destroy something of Severus' world, and he wonders why Severus even bothers to allow them. Maybe because he's afraid that Harry might want to leave otherwise.

Stupid, Harry thinks. He could never leave, not anymore. He needs this, he needs Severus, he needs the knowledge of Severus needing him.

Severus pushes him away, but Harry doesn't give up. He throws his arms around Severus and whispers in his ear, “Hurt me.”

“Go away.”

“No, really,” Harry says. “Hurt me. Hard. I want you to.”

Harry grabs hold of him, embraces him, Severus' robe scratches Harry's bare skin. And then, Harry's world shatters and falls apart like a snow fortress does when the snow's too try, because Severus throws him off and walks away from him.

\* \* \* \* \*

At night, Harry crawls into bed and stretches out next to Severus. He can hear Severus' ‘faking sleep’ breathing. Severus' back is turned to Harry.

In the dusk of the room, Harry stares at his skinny back and pointy shoulders, wanting to say something that would cut through this web of silence that entraps them each in a different corner of it, incapacitating them, holding them apart. Harry doesn't know what to say. *I love you? I don't want them to come over anymore? All I need is you? Hurt me? How are you feeling?* – nothing seems right.

“I want to go out tomorrow,” Harry says.

Next to him, Severus stops breathing, as if Harry's words had knocked the wind out of him. Harry bites his lips, cursing himself. Severus doesn't like Ron and Hermione coming over, but he absolutely loathes *taking Harry out*.

Every time Severus and Harry go out into the outside world (which doesn't happen often), it's awkward and Severus hates every moment of it. Severus picks secluded places, places where they won't be spotted or recognized, but they invariably bump into old friends. The old friends gush over the two of them and babble, but there's nothing to talk about, and Severus looks like he just needs to get back home, where there will be no-one but him and Harry.

Harry supposes it's not surprising that Severus almost never works. They never talk about finances, but Severus' pension from the Ministry must be more than enough to keep him comfortable. And Severus doesn't need much, he has no interest in the outside world. All he needs is Harry.

Harry waits. The dreary web of silence folds, twists, turns into a noose around Harry's neck. It's hard to breathe, so he doesn't and Severus doesn't either.

"Fine," Severus says suddenly.

"What?"

"I said fine. We'll go out tomorrow. Sleep now."

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry sleeps. He dreams of a snow fort somewhere in the countryside in Scotland on a bright sunny Christmas morning. The air is crisp and fresh. Ron is lying on his back in the snow, moving his arms and legs to make a 'snow angel'. Harry trips over Ron's foot and falls on top of the snow fort. It crumbles under his weight and falls apart. Harry scrambles to sit up and stares at Hermione, wondering if she'll be upset.

Hermione isn't upset; she laughs and hands Harry a mug of mulled wine, still hot. It tastes like cinnamon and spices; Harry drinks and drinks from her hands, but when the wine is finished he sees a lump of human hair on the bottom of the mug. He chokes and tries to scream, but no sound comes out, and Hermione says, "I'm sorry, Harry, that's just the recipe. I can't do anything about that."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning Severus is calm. Harry watches him get up and get dressed. There's something mesmerizing about Severus dressing this morning, he acts like a man who's about to be executed but is resolved to look his best for the occasion. The crisp-white collar of Severus' shirt is a stark contrast to his black robe.

"Will you get dressed? Or would you like to be taken to Diagon Alley naked, on a collar and leash?" Severus asks dryly. Harry shivers. He knows that to be an empty threat, but it still scares him a bit when Severus talks like that.

Harry gets out of bed and begins to get dressed. He puts on his underwear, jeans, tee-shirt and sweater. It takes him a while to find his winter boots, and a while longer to lace them. His fingers shake, but he stubbornly continues to fight with the laces, while Severus watches and waits.

"Let's go," Severus says finally.

They step out of Severus' house. It's snowing just a bit, tiny dry snowflakes are landing on the porch and the cobbled street. Severus reaches into his pocket and produces a blindfold. Harry sighs.

"It's not like I'm gong to run away."

"Indulge me," Severus says in a deceptively soft voice. Harry knows that to be an order.

He takes the blindfold and puts it around his eyes. He doesn't cheat; it's snug and secure; he can't see a bloody thing. He's at Severus' mercy when Severus takes hold of him and Apparates them somewhere.

Harry can't see, but his guess is that they're in Diagon Alley; he thinks he can recognize the smell coming from Fortescue's. But even that smell is ever-so-slightly different; something has changed in the last five years, and Harry doesn't know what. For a moment Harry wonders what he looks

like to everyone around him, a blindfold over his eyes, Severus guiding him. Then, he realizes that he doesn't give a fuck.

Severus' fingers are gripping his elbow and Severus navigates him somewhere, through the doors. There's warmth here, smell of mulled wine, cinnamon, fresh coffee and fresh bread. Severus removes Harry's blindfold.

Harry looks around. A large cafe, wooden tables and chairs around them, an enormous hearth with flickering flames. The hostess, a tall woman with her hair woven into a tight bun, gives Harry a friendly smile.

Harry doesn't return it, he stares at Severus.

“You've reserved the whole cafe just for the two of us?”

“Yes,” Severus says simply.

Harry bites his lip. He wants to yell at Severus for being so – so – Harry doesn't even know what. He just wants to grab Severus by the shoulders and shake him.

“Is there a problem?” Severus asks, raising an eyebrow.

Harry sighs in resignation. “No. No problem at all. It's fine. Thanks.”

They sit down. Severus orders for both of them. Harry doesn't care. This isn't what he wanted, but he can't really blame Severus, Merlin knows, the man is trying his best.

The food arrives, fresh croissants and coffee, honey and jam. They begin to eat.

“So, what do you want to do for Christmas?” Harry asks between the bites.

“Hm?” Severus seems to be startled by the question.

“We could go with Ron and Hermione. They'll have us over for Christmas. They've got a cottage in Scotland. What do you think?”

Severus' entire body stiffens, but the expression on his face doesn't change. He chews in silence, his lips are tightly sealed.

“We can do that,” Severus says finally. “If that's what you need.”

Harry gives him a disbelieving look. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Severus says expressionlessly.

Harry sighs. He knows he just won some kind of argument, but it doesn't feel like winning.

The door to the diner opens, giving a loud squeak. Harry turns his head to look – and blinks. It's Colin Creevey, of all people, smiling ear to ear, the old camera in his hands.

The hostess hurries to shoo him out, but he dives under her arm and runs to Harry's table. “Hey, Harry!” Colin's voice is bubbling with excitement. “I thought I heard you were in the neighbourhood, I thought... oh, hello, Professor Snape. Ah, bloody hell, Harry, it's good to see you again!” Colin extends his hand to Harry and Harry has no choice but to shake it. Colin's handshake is surprisingly strong, stronger than Harry remembers it to be.



Then again, it's been five years since Harry had seen him; Colin has grown a bit taller and bigger in that time. His face hasn't changed much though and Colin seems to have the same air about him as always: innocent and oblivious of anyone's discomfort.

Across the table from him, Severus lets out a long sigh but doesn't put an end to this interruption.

Then again, each and every outing of theirs ends up with someone from their past bumping into them. Last time it was the twins, who, by some odd chance, ended up in Cardiff the same time Severus and Harry were there. The time before, a year ago, they ran into McGonagall in Edinburgh. She talked and talked then, all about Hogwarts and students, while Harry watched her, marveling at how white her hair had gone, and how she was smiling at all the wrong times now.

Harry doesn't know how all of those old friends always manage to catch up with him whenever Severus takes him out. Maybe they're concerned for Harry; maybe that's why they're stalking him. Harry smiles unhappily at the thought and nods to the empty chair.

“Well, sit down. Would you like a coffee? How're you doing?”

“Um, I'm great! No coffee, thanks... Uh, I'm working for the Prophet, we're doing a report on...” Colin continues to talk and talk, (something about the human-house elf relations), but Harry can barely hear him.

Somehow, he doesn't believe anything that Colin is saying, he's certain that Colin is lying to him, but he doesn't know why. Nothing seems real, not anymore, not the cafe, not the unfinished food, not the tables and chairs, not the hostess, who continues to scrutinize the scene unfolding in front of her.

“Can I take a picture of you two?” Colin asks, standing up. Harry stares at the camera in his hands. Then, something snaps, and he lashes out, punches hard. The camera flies out of Colin's hands and onto the floor, shattering with a plaintive sound.

Colin takes a step back, Harry advances on him, fists clenched.

Then, he feels Severus' hands on his shoulders.

“Harry, stop that,” he says.

Severus' voice brings him back to his senses. This feels real: Severus' hands, his voice. Colin turns and runs, making a mad dash for the exit. Harry turns around and tucks his nose into Severus' robe.

Severus runs a flattened palm down Harry's back and Apparates them home straight from the cafe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once they're at home, Harry is calm. He doesn't know what came over him, he can't explain it. Sitting down on the couch, Severus watches him with concern.

“Harry,” he says softly. “I realize that... I can't be enough for you. I'm sorry for that. I realize too, that what I'm doing to you is very selfish; you need more of the outside world than I'm giving you.”

Harry shakes his head madly, furiously. He kneels in front of Severus, burying face in Severus' lap.

“Don't need any more of that,” Harry mutters.

“Why did you attack your friend? Why did you break his camera?” Severus asks. There's no

accusation in his voice.

“I don't even know. Everything seemed... weird. I felt angry. I didn't know what I was doing. I'm sorry.”

He really doesn't know what came over him. Maybe he's gone completely feral just living with Severus for five years, hardly any contact with the outside world. Or maybe he's going insane. Maybe he should tell Severus about the dreams, the hair, Harry thinks, then changes his mind.

“Tell me what you need,” Severus insists, running his hand through Harry's hair.

That thoughtless, absentminded gentleness is driving him mad, and Harry doesn't answer. Severus doesn't pry. He just urges Harry to lie on the couch and Harry falls asleep with his head in Severus' lap.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's evening. Harry is naked, positioned on the bed on all fours, forehead pressing into the mattress. He knows he's making an obscene display of himself, it's embarrassing, thrilling, exciting all at once. More to the point, it's real, unlike the world out there.

Severus stands behind him. Harry sways his hips from side to side in a silent invitation.

When the first lash of the whip falls on his buttocks, Harry barely manages to hold back a yelp. The whipping continues, slow, steady, measured. It stings at first, then burns, then just – fucking hurts, but Harry likes that.

His mind is swimming, and he's beginning to forget the embarrassments of the day and the terrors of the night. Nothing exists but him, the lashing of the whip, and then, a while later, Severus' hand on his arse, rubbing along the welts.

“Legs wider,” Severus orders.

Harry obeys quickly, enthusiastically. He's as open to Severus as is humanly possible, and yet, he wishes he could give more. Sometimes he thinks he could split himself lengthwise, if that would make it more enjoyable for Severus to fuck him.

Without undressing fully, just unbuttoning his robe and trousers, Severus begins to fuck. Harry pushes back hard with every thrust, clenching his arse to increase the friction when Severus' cock slides out of him, relaxing when it drives into him.

Harry is only half-hard through the entire fucking session, but that doesn't matter, all that matters is that Severus comes, and then, they both collapse on the bed together. His arse is still on fire, but Harry doesn't mind that. He turns to lie on his side and stares at Severus.

Severus' eyes are tightly shut; his eyelashes flutter like broken butterfly wings.

“It's all right,” Harry whispers. “Doesn't hurt.”

Severus wraps his arms around him and rocks him, until Harry falls asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry dreams of Colin's camera, shattered, broken pieces of it lying in a heap of human hair, all blond.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Harry wakes up, it's late night. There are voices coming from the hallway, and Harry can only make out one of them; Severus'. Something is wrong, Harry can tell. He gets out of bed, puts his glasses on and starts looking for his wand, then realizes he doesn't know where it is. It must be years since he'd used it last.

Severus kicks the bedroom door open and bursts in. Harry stares up at him.

"Potter, on your feet," Severus squeezes those words through his teeth.

Still naked, Harry stands up. He feels sick to his stomach, Severus hasn't called him 'Potter' in a very long time. Suddenly, he has the urge to cover himself.

Severus casts a Silencio on him. Then, another spell follows.

"Walk," Severus orders.

Harry struggles to obey. The new spell partially binds him, he can't move his arms. He can walk, just barely; he's moving slowly, forcing every step, feeling like he's wading through water. There's a ringing in his ears and he's suffocating again. Where am I going, he wants to ask, but the silencing spell keeps him mute.

"You see, Potter, we have company," Severus says, resting his hand on Harry's shoulder. Severus' voice is cool and dispassionate. "The company wants to see you just the way you are."

Harry swallows hard. Never before, not in a million years, he could have thought Severus could humiliate him like this, display him before someone else. This feels like the end of everything. Maybe something happened to make Severus go insane; maybe something pushed him over the edge. Maybe it was Harry who did. Maybe Severus really can't handle sharing him with the outside world and decided to share him with someone else?

Harry wants to beg, plead, promise that he'll never want to go out, he'll never ask to see his friends again, but the silencing spell holds, and all he can do is walk, naked with a welted arse, fully helpless, the collar around his neck.

When he reaches the sitting room, he doesn't know who he expects to see. Maybe Remus and Tonks, maybe Ron and Hermione, maybe Colin himself with a new camera.

Certainly not the cloaked figure, looming tall in the sitting room. It can't possibly be him, Harry thinks frantically, it can't be, can't be, he's dead, they killed him, Harry killed him, Harry remembers that.

The visitor turns around. The mangled inhuman face has the expression of something akin to amusement.

"I hear your pet caused some commotion in Diagon Alley today," Voldemort says. "That's not a good thing."

"He's fully harmless my Lord," Severus replies, grasping the o-ring on the back of Harry's collar and giving Harry a small shake for emphasis. Harry wants to struggle, but the spell doesn't allow that. Strong hands turn him around, displaying his abused backside to the visitor. Harry tries to kick, but his limbs don't obey him.

He feels Voldemort's icy hands on his shoulders, gripping, forcing him to turn around again.

“Harmless Harry,” Voldemort muses, then looks at Severus. “So you're still keeping him as your pet? Correct his memories each and every time something like this happens?”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“So you're still paying people to take Polyjuice and use the aging charm so they can pretend to be Harry's friends,” Voldemort says with a smile. “I wondered at first why you'd kept all the hair from every single Muggle-loving scum we've executed. You're a very sick man, Severus.”

Severus' smile is bitter and mirthless. “I know I am, My Lord. But you will permit me this one whim, will you not?”

“I've been patient so far. I suppose there's no harm in allowing you to have your little diversions. Still, it surprises me that you continue to choose to go into all this trouble. It must be a time-consuming task, creating a whole world of illusions for someone?”

Severus' voice sends an icy chill that reaches all the way into Harry's bones. “It's actually less trouble this way, My Lord. He obeys and doesn't try to run.”

Voldemort nods and stares at Harry thoughtfully. He walks out of Severus' house without saying another word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Harry is barely aware of anything when Snape walks him to the kitchen, makes him sit down at the table. He removes the silencing charm from Harry, but the binding spell remains.

Harry bites his lip. Snape pulls out his wand.

“Wait,” Harry whispers. “Not just yet. Tell me.”

“Tell you what?” Snape asks tiredly.

“What happened? When? Five years ago...”

“You and your friends were caught during the Horcrux hunt. The Dark Lord... decided not to take any chances,” Snape says.

“So... the victory celebration... the night after... all of that is – what? A false memory that you've implanted in my brain?”

“Yes. Though, mind you, I couldn't have done it if the natural inclination to this sort of thing on your part hadn't been there to begin with.”

“Then, whenever we go out, it's actually you who arranges those chance meetings with my ‘old friends’? Just to make me believe that I'm still living in a normal world? Fucking hell, Snape! Just how much do you have to pay someone to pretend to be Hermione and hug me?”

The corner of Snape's mouth twitches slightly. “Cost isn't the issue, Potter.”

“And what would you have done if I had insisted on going to that stupid cabin in Scotland with Ron and Hermione, huh? Tell me!”

Snape sighs. “That'd cost more, of course. And it'd require a great deal more... hair.”

Harry lets out a brief, hysterical laugh. “So – all of it? A lie? Ron doesn't work for the Auror

office? Colin isn't a reporter for the Daily Prophet?"

"Harry, there's no Auror Office anymore. There is no Daily Prophet either. What is... it's, well, quite different. More to the point, there's no more Weasley, no more Creevey, no more Granger. There's no-one left of the Order, Dumbledore's Army, or any of their sympathizers."

Harry wants to shake his head in denial, but the binding spell still holds, forcing him to sit up straight and stare ahead. He can hardly fathom that the twins, McGonagall, Remus and Tonks, Colin and so many others are all gone. He can hardly fathom that Ron and Hermione both died five years ago, that there's no cabin in Scotland, and that there's nothing left of them but the hair used in Polyjuice to recreate them for two hours at a time. He wants to rage, scream insults, demand to be released. But he knows he's got very little time before Snape starts altering his memory, and he knows he needs to make every word count; maybe, just maybe, he can find the right words...

"You know you can't do this forever," Harry tries to reason with him. "Keep wiping and altering my memories. How often are you doing this, anyway? Once every two months? Once a month? I can feel it, you know. Everything is beginning to blur. I don't know what's real and what's not anymore. Soon there'll be nothing left of me or my mind, just whatever you put in there."

Snape inclines his head. "I've considered that possibility," he admits. "I'm trying to be careful."

He's about to lift his wand again and Harry bites his lip, desperate to stall him.

"Don't do this, Snape. Listen to me. There's got to be someone left out there! We've got to find them and join them and..."

"There's no-one," Snape whispers, and there's a note of madness in his voice. "No-one at all. Give me a name, and I will show you a bag of their hair."

"Then what's the point?!!" Harry is screaming now. "What's the fucking point, Snape? Why are you doing this, why are you keeping me alive like this?"

Something softens in Snape's expression ever so slightly.

"Because I need you," he says simply. "Of that world, you're the only one left."

Harry wants to talk more, but he's out of words. He has a feeling that this isn't the first time he's lost this argument and it won't be his last.

When Snape's wand points at him, Harry looks away.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning, Harry wakes up early. His wrists are restrained, shackled to the headboard of the bed. He strains against his bonds and gives up quickly, there's no point. Yesterday is a blur, then again, all the days of Harry's life are beginning to blur together. He doesn't mind it, not really, because he's with Severus, and Severus needs him, and that alone is enough. There's a twinge of loneliness that comes with that thought, but Harry pushes it away.

He feels Severus' hand on his shoulder, shaking him awake.

"We should get up," Severus says. He flicks his wand and releases Harry from his bindings. "Get dressed."

"Get dressed," Harry mumbles, stretching lazily. "What, has it been two weeks? Ron and

Hermione are coming over?"

"Yes and yes."

For a while Harry lies in bed on his belly and watches Severus get dressed. Severus is perfectly calm this morning, and there's no hint of displeasure about Ron's and Hermione's visit, not as far as Harry can tell. Harry doesn't know whether Severus doesn't mind anymore, or whether he's just controlling himself better after all this time.

Harry sighs, gets up and goes looking for his clothes. He realizes that he can't remember where he'd put them last time he'd taken them off.

"Closet in the hallway, second shelf," Severus informs him.

"Oh. Gah. Lucky at least one of us remembers something."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ron and Hermione arrive an hour later. Harry walks to the door and lets them in. Hermione's cheeks are reddened from the frost and there are melting snowflakes in the fiery volcano eruption that is Ron's hair. Harry stares at the two of them, and for some reason it almost hurts to see them. A part of him thinks he just saw them yesterday. Another part of him thinks it's been years and years and years.

Harry takes a step towards them and embraces them both. He sucks in a deep breath and is instantly made dizzy by smell of melting snow on Ron's jacket and the smell of Hermione's hair.

Hermione laughs out loud. Ron pats his back.

Harry holds on to them, thinking he might never let them go.

"Missed you," Harry says quietly. "What took you so long?"

**~fin**

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